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ABSTRACT

As the competition among providers in the continuing education market intensifies, universities starting new seminars will need to alter their marketing and recruitment procedures drastically. Telemarketing and a two-step marketing approach will undoubtedly become more widespread in the future. Individuals responsible for marketing continuing education seminars should consider the nine most common objections to registering and try to develop promotional copy that is specifically designed to overcome these objections. Among the strategies of writing successful promotional copy are the following: establish an image of quality and value, describe the program fully, focus on the benefits of the seminar, include testimonials and peer recommendations wherever possible, use words that emphasize immediacy and results, use different copy for different audiences, focus on how a 1- to 3-day investment of time can and will pay off, emphasize the unique aspects of the program, and promote the time and location of the seminar. (MN)

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Starting and Promoting a "First-Time" Association Seminar Series

by Sharon Paul

Fierce competition for participants will characterize the continuing education market in the next five years. Universities, publishers, consultants and private groups will increasingly serve overlapping markets. To association execs, this will translate into a challenge to draw participants to *their* programs.

Now for the good news. Although the field of seminars and conferences is becoming increasingly competitive there is a growing demand for such programs. New delivery systems and marketing techniques will alter the planning of educational programs. Finally, and most importantly, there will be an increased demand for *quality*.

There is little doubt that associations are generating more revenue from their seminar and conference activities. This creates greater competition among related, as well as competitive, associations.

Relieve Financial Pressures

More universities are expanding their continuing education activities due to financial pressures. A dramatic increase is occurring in specialized programs which have traditionally been the domain of the associations.

Publishers, who are brand new entries to the field of continuing education, are now also in direct competition with associations. Magazine readership is very much like association membership.

As society changes, there has been an increasing demand for seminars and conferences. Technology, new techniques, the economy, and skills such as genetic engineering and personal computers all create a knowledge void that will need to be filled.

Regulations and legislative changes have grown to cope with rapidly changing information and technology. Population and demographic changes – the baby boom generation has reached adulthood – also increases demand for educational programming.

Marketing will be drastically affected by the increased cost of direct mail and growing sophistication of the market. There will be a number of innovations in the marketing process.

'Two-Step' Generates Interest

Telemarketing is sure to become more popular, as is two-step marketing. In the latter process, associations will begin by generating interest in a program rather than simply sending out brochures and waiting for registration forms to come in. Once the interest is created, a tactful telephone call will be used to encourage registration.

Newsletters and other "informal" approaches will be used. Rather than creating promotional brochures, a newsletter will be used to convey more detailed information.

Most important, however, will be the increased heed for quality programming. Sponsors of mediocre programs will face red ink and empty seats. Audiences will demand highly focused information and stimulating learning experiences.

And, as in any other field, only the fittest will survive.

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How to Overcome the Nine Most Common Objections to Registering

Sit back for a minute and think of the three biggest reasons a person is likely not to register for your program. List them in order of importance. Then try to write copy specifically to overcome those objections and obstacles.

Along with these possibilities are some of the approaches to consider for your copy.

1. "I don't believe in the sponsor." If this is your problem, don't play up your sponsorship. Instead, focus on your speakers, advisory board and subject matter. However, these are only temporary expedients. And the real answer to this problem is to establish an image of quality and value by delivering quality and marketing your image.

2. "I don't think I'll get anything (or enough) out of this program." Have you described your program fully? Have you focused on benefits, that is, what your audience will be able to do as a result of attendance?

3. "These people can't tell me anything I don't already know." This statement shows lack of faith in your presenters and probably a generally low regard for the effectiveness of most meetings.

Testimonials from respected organizations and individuals will help here. But use hard-hitting copy from "power hitters." Also consider stressing peer exchange in addition to emphasizing the credentials of speakers. Be specific. Give the prospect something to grab on to. Don't skimp on describing your program.

4. "It looks like a comprehensive program, but it won't help me with the problems I have today." Show how it will! Use words like immediate, action, plan now, and latest.

5. "It's a nice program for everyone else, but it's not geared to my specific needs. Most of it will be a waste of my time." Challenge the reader! Show how the program benefits large and small, supplier and user, architect and contractor.

Consider separate letters for different audience components. For example, "As a small manufacturer you should be particularly interested in this conference because. . ." Show how one portion of the audience will learn from another. If you're running a conference with concurrent sessions. . .emphasize the "pick and choose" aspect.

6. "I don't have time to attend." Show the reader how an investment of one-to-three days will pay off immediately. Address the objection specifically. Acknowledge the importance of the attendee's time. Show how you have "jam packed" and "chock fulled" the program so that not a moment of precious time will be wasted.

7. "I can't afford to go." You can't afford to miss this program is the response to this objection. Show all the reasons why. Let them know what they'll missing by not attending. Missing in content. . .and more importantly. . .missing in benefits.

8. "Same old thing." Show your program is new, unique, different, sharper, more specifically geared to their immediate needs.

9. "It's not at a convenient time or place." Promote the time and place. Let them know why you selected the location, the month and the day.

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